

# Upset Winners & Young Record Breakers

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Celebrating the 32nd year, Upper Hutt's Cactus Karapoti Classic continued its renown as the Southern Hemisphere's longest running mountain bike race. But defending champions among both men and women played second fiddle to standout rides from the other side of the Tasman.

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Established in 1986, the Cactus Karapoti Classic is the longest running mountain bike race in the Southern Hemisphere. Based in Upper Hutt's rugged Akatarawa Ranges near Wellington, the course is an old-school adventure ride featuring huge hills and river crossings amid remote and rugged forest trails.

This year some 600 riders from eight countries also battled heavy rain and muddy conditions that turned the 32nd event into an epic.

The woman's race was certainly an epic. Local Upper Hutt doctor and three-time winner, Kim Hurst, was odds-on favourite. A year ago the 38 year old broke her own course record and was keen to push the pace this year. But on the first climb up Deadwood Ridge, Wellingtonian-turned-Aussie, Samara Sheppard, threw out a challenge that Hurst could not match.

Samara Sheppard



Karapoti's classic Lemans-style start



Sheppard first tasted Karapoti success in 2007 when winning the junior women's race with a race record that still stands. But despite going on to ride professionally on the World Cup scene, in the 10 years since she hadn't had much luck at Karapoti. A string of mechanicals, punctures and illness saw Sheppard limited to twice finishing third. But following a solid 12 months dominating the Australian mountain bike marathon scene, the 26-year-old returned home intent on turning her Karapoti luck.

Sheppard hit Deadwood Ridge like it was the last climb, rather than the first. Hurst kept her in sight until the Rock Garden, but the leader pulled away for good on Devil's Staircase and then started thinking about the race record.

"On Dopers I realised I might be on record pace so I just nailed it all the way home," Sheppard would say later, after finishing a mere 33 second adrift of Hurst's time.

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In conditions that most considered five minutes slower than 2016, the winner's ride was arguably the most impressive ever by a woman at Karapoti. Eventually finishing six minutes clear of Hurst, Sheppard stopped the clock in 2hrs 42min 45secs. Hurst held on well for second place in 2hrs 49min 07secs to bring her Karapoti tally to three wins and four second placings. Nelson-based German, Ingrid Richter, who finished second in 2016, enjoyed another solid ride for third in 3hrs 05min 11secs.

The men's race was a little less clear cut. Defending champion Jack Compton lived up to his favouritism by taking the lead up Devil's Staircase, and looked to have the race won until a puncture with just five kilometres to go.

Australian Kyle Ward, meanwhile, had spread his effort to move from third to second on the final climb up the Pram Track on Doper's Hill. Coming upon Compton's demise, the 25-year-old Australian recalled, "I really felt for the guy," but freely admitted that he wasted no time in sweeping past the unfortunate Porirua rider to take the win.

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Kyle Ward



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Lucy Jurke



Compton's bad luck aside, Ward's win was first rate, with his time of 2hrs 17min 40secs making the Australian the fourth fastest Karapoti winner in history. Behind him, Compton nursed his bike home in 2hrs 19min 01secs, with Wellington's Ed Crossling in third with 2hrs 21min 07secs.

Among the 600-odd finishers behind those surprise winners, Wellington's 72-year-old Peter Schmitz was the eldest, winning the Expert 70-plus category in 4hrs 56min 24secs, just 12min clear of old rival Tom Clarkson.

Even more impressively for Schmitz, however, was that his ride continued the Wellingtonian's reign as the rider with more Karapoti finishes than anyone else. Schmitz had finished 28 consecutive Karapoti's, although his closest rival, Francis Hoen, is biting at his wheels with 27 finishes, also consecutively.

At the other age of the age spectrum, Wellington pre-teens Lucy Jurke and Emily Hannah were the youngest. Both are aged 11 and on race day Emily clocked in at 4hrs 25min 13secs. Lucy finished in 5hrs 17min 49secs and at one month younger than Emily, set a new record as the youngest ever female finisher of the Southern Hemisphere's longest running mountain bike event.

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